

JOHN CUMMINGS MUNRO

By JOHN T. BOTTOMLEY, M.D., F.A.C.S., Boston

Reprint from

SURGERY, GYNECOLOGY AND OBSTETRICS

January, 1925, pages 136-139

Published by Surgical Pub. Co., Chicago, U.S.A.

JOHN CUMMINGS MUNRO

By JOHN T. BOTTOMLEY, M.D., F.A.C.S., BOSTON

JOHN CUMMINGS MUNRO, of a family long identified with the historic town of Lexington, was a thorough New Englander. The American Munros originated at Inverness, Scotland, where the Clan has a clear record from the eleventh century, and where Sir Hector Munro, Baron Fowlis XXIX, still occupies the original grant made, before 1034, by Malcolm II. The first of the name in Massachusetts was William, deported by Cromwell after the battle of Worcester for fighting under the Stuart king. This William settled about 1657 in Lexington—then Cambridge Farms—in a district still called “Scotland,” and was the ancestor of fourteen Munros who, on April 19, 1775, stood up, with half a hundred other farmers, against eight hundred British regulars. The orderly sergeant of this little company of “Minute Men” was Doctor Munro’s great-grandfather, William, who for many years was the host of the famous Munro Tavern, built by that William’s grandfather in 1695. In a still older house, nearly opposite the Tavern, John C. Munro, second son of James S., was born, March 26, 1858.

His mother was Alice B. Phinney, descended from John, who came to Cape Cod soon after the Pilgrim settlement. Doctor Munro’s grandfather, Elias Phinney, was a lawyer of standing and a pioneer in scientific agriculture. He came to Lexington in boyhood, was graduated from Harvard in 1801, and married Catherine Bartlett of Charlestown. Many of her family were distinguished in medicine. A number of Scotch Munros have been eminent in surgery, four of them occupying, in genealogical succession for more than a century, the chair of anatomy in the University of Edinburgh. John Munro inherited, therefore, a definite bent toward a profession which, from boyhood, he steadily expressed his determination to follow. In his youth, too, he showed keen interest in entomology and the use of the microscope.

Munro won the Franklin medal for good scholarship in the Boston Latin School, and entered Harvard with the class of 1877. Immediately upon graduation in 1884 he settled in Boston. He became associated with the anatomical department of Harvard in 1889 and for 6 years worked there assiduously. Joining the teaching staff of the surgical department in 1894, he continued that association for eleven years. He began his hospital connections in 1891, first as surgeon

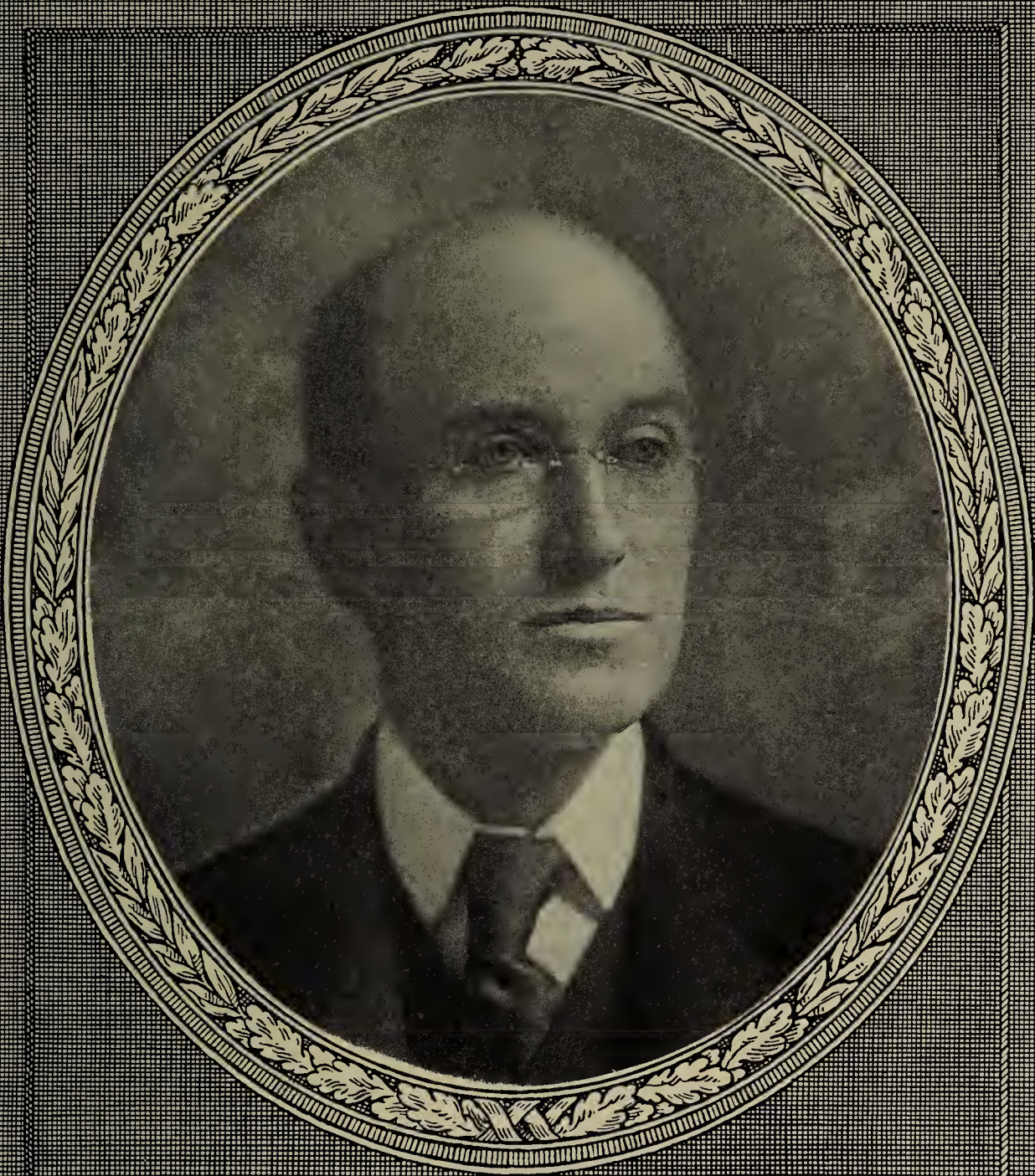
to out-patients at the Carney Hospital and, later, as surgeon to the Boston City Hospital, where he remained until 1903. In that year he was appointed surgeon-in-chief at the Carney Hospital. This position he held until his untimely death.

Doctor Munro is probably best known through his clinic at the Carney Hospital, established in 1903. The opening of this clinic was an important event in New England, since it was the first permanent continuous service instituted in that section of the country. As its chief, he assumed responsibility for the conduct of the entire surgical department of the hospital and, under his guidance, the clinic rapidly achieved a high place among those of the United States. In it he demonstrated the possibility of doing satisfactory surgery, successful in its results, with a meagre plant, simple technique, and a minimum of red tape and assistants. There, too, he gave proof of the truth epitomized in a quotation to be found in one of his addresses: "The potency of the individual is greater and nobler than the influence of class or organization or even institution." The clinic was one of the best known and most frequented in New England.

A member of all the important national societies, Doctor Munro was a firm believer in the value of professional meetings and was a zealous attendant at both local and national assemblies. He was particularly devoted to the American Society of Clinical Surgery, of which he was president in 1906-1907. He was a fairly regular contributor to the literature of his profession and, in 1907, wrote for Keen's *System of Surgery* several chapters which are so fundamentally sound that with but few minor changes they are entirely acceptable today. His writings, as a rule, set forth conclusions drawn from his own extensive clinical experience and, since he had no hesitation in publishing his failures and his unfavorable results as well as his successes, these papers were always suggestive and were particularly valuable in a practical way. In professional discussions he took no position of which he did not, at the time, feel comparatively sure; and, while always courteous, he had the uncompromising attitude believed to be characteristic of the Scotch.

In the early days of gastric surgery he contributed greatly to its advancement not only in New England but in the country at large. He published valuable communications on the surgery of the biliary apparatus and on that of acute pancreatitis. He was greatly interested in hæmorrhagic pachymeningitis and added much to our knowledge of the worth of surgical measures in the treatment of that affection. He was one of the earliest and strongest advocates of prompt operation in appendicitis, and he called attention in no uncertain way to the danger of portal and lymphatic infection in neglected and improperly treated cases. Perhaps his most striking paper was that in which he advocated ligation of the ductus arteriosus in certain cases of atelectasis. Though this paper was not published until 1907,¹ the idea had been in his mind many years, and in the early nineties all the anatomical details had been so thoroughly worked out by him on the cadavers

¹ Ann. Surg., 1907, Sept.



JOHN C. MUNRO
1858-1910

of newborn children, that he regarded it as a justifiable procedure on the living in cases with beginning atelectasis or other evidences of impending death from circulatory disturbance. All this was a long time before cardiac surgery of any kind was in vogue and indicates how well in advance of his day he was in some surgical fields.

In an address before the Canadian Medical Association at Toronto, in 1909, he epitomized what is best and most important in hospital standardization of to-day. The title of that address is significant and arresting, "The Surgical Rights of the Public." He recognized that in the practice of surgery the rights of the patient are primary, paramount, and fundamental. In the same address he warmly advocated the development of a class of professional anæsthetists. He did not live to see his ideas develop into widespread customs but doubtless he then visualized what today are common usages.

He came from a community where, to use the words of President Coolidge, "folks are happy and contented; they belong to themselves, live within their income, and fear no man." Such communities are apt to breed over-conservatism, if not, indeed, provincialism; but Doctor Munro showed neither. He was one of the first, if not the first, surgeon of the Eastern States to recognize the value of the then small Mayo clinic and of other prominent clinics of the Middle West. He became a frequent visitor to them and urged the importance of such visits as an exceptional means of securing higher education in surgical craftsmanship and of broadening one's outlook in the field of surgery. While cherishing a proper respect for the old in medicine, he kept his mind open to new ideas and was eminently progressive.

He was admittedly a very capable surgeon. His hands, small and wondrously fashioned, were peculiarly adapted to deftness in work. His technique was admirable. He was not spectacular. Some considered his surgery bold. But they mistook for boldness that certainty of act which comes from accurate anatomical knowledge and from clear perception of the object to be attained. He was unafraid, because he had no uncertainty; he was rapid in his work, because he wasted no effort and made no unnecessary movement. He knew what he desired to accomplish just as clearly as he saw the shortest way to it, consistent with safety. Thus did he justify his long days of work in the dissecting-room and the anatomical laboratory. He was an accurate observer; he had a logical mind; he was familiar with the literature of his profession; he had a practical knowledge of pathology in the living. As a consequence; he was not only an able diagnostician but he gave due consideration to the problems presented at operation and made a wise choice of the operative procedure. His surgical judgment, always good, ripened with the years until it reached the high level of his masterly technique. The combination made him one of the best surgeons of his time.

Doctor Munro was an indefatigable worker to the point where his activities exceeded his physical strength. An institution with which he was connected in

his early days possessed a large surgical staff; yet most of the emergency work and the difficult cases came to his hands because his colleagues were less keen than he to acquire surgical experience. He never "played for a record." What procedure he considered best adapted to the pathological condition presented by the patient, that procedure he carried out. He never allowed himself to do a relieving operation, although it might be easy, where a curative one was indicated.

He was of a modest, even retiring disposition. Once known, he was eminently social and was one of the most popular members of the Tavern Club, where many of the best in the artistic, professional and intellectual life of Boston foregather. By his close friends he was greatly beloved.

Charity, kindness, and consideration walked with him daily. His honesty was transparent and he looked at the world through eyes of truth and faith. Once he saw truth in another, his faith in and his loyalty to that other were necessary sequences. He had a strong sense of justice and was disposed to give every man his full due. He knew no guile and practised no deceit. His admiration for Doctor Edward R. Squibb, whose daughter he married, was unbounded. The minds of both men were molded after similar patterns; both had similar objectives; the one to manufacture the very finest products of the laboratory, the other to offer his best for suffering humanity; to both the monetary reward was wholly secondary.

He was a man of simple tastes and quiet culture. He possessed an extensive library, selected with discrimination, and found his chief recreation in reading and in music, of which he had unusual knowledge. He played with skill and remarkable sureness of tone both the violin and the viola, and in college was leader of the Pierian Sodality.¹ To the end of his life he associated himself in ensemble-work with various groups of enthusiastic amateurs. In this way he read a great deal of important music and kept himself in excellent practice. While his devotion to his profession gave him little time for participation in civic affairs, he was, nevertheless, a distinct asset to the community through the influence of his character upon the younger men who came directly or indirectly under his instruction.

He died on December 6, 1910, at the zenith of his powers and at a time of life when there was every reason to anticipate many more years of brilliant, productive work. In his final illness, which was long and painful, he was resolute, unafraid, and uncomplaining. He died as he had lived, a very gallant gentleman.

¹ A famous Harvard musical organization.

